

...Upfront

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Eating in the 20th Century

Americans have enjoyed creating new foods and dishes, but eating them has been our real pleasure. What we eat and how we eat it reflects our culture and our lives. America's food choices and eating habits changed as dramatically during the 20th century as hair and clothing styles, modes of transportation, and the pace of life. The same 100 years that rocketed us from the age of steam power to the era of the Internet also took us from the wood stove to the microwave, from Sunday dinners to food delivered to our doorsteps. Each small change reflected something about the sweeping political, social, and economic upheavals and stunning technical achievements that made the 20th century unique. It has been quite a journey.

To mark the new Millennium, this issue of *FoodReview* examines the past 100 years of eating in America. It makes for fascinating, informative reading. At the beginning of the 20th century, home cooking—largely the work of women—was done on wood stoves; indoor running water was a novelty. Then, the modern kitchen appliance was the ice box, automobiles were scarce, and 40 percent of the population lived on farms. Most food was fresh, reflecting our agricultural roots, with a heavy emphasis on lard, butter, fresh meats, sugar, potatoes, and seasonable vegetables.

By the middle of the 20th century, more than a million American homes had television sets, a new medium that came to have a profound effect on our world views, our family life, and our eating habits. TV dinners were popular. People were becoming more conscious of nutrition even as they snacked more. Agricultural advances provided abundant food at ever lower prices. Processed foods rapidly proliferated as home cooking and canning fell by the wayside. Urbanization continued, and farms became home to only 15 percent of the population. American life quickened, and as more families saw both parents working, fast food restaurants began to take off.

This remarkable century closes with a booming economy and people busier than ever. Women are vital to our labor force and more and more men venture into the kitchen. Dining out is more popular than ever; natural foods are in strong demand, and Americans are eating more fruit, vegetables, and poultry. Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and other regions further shape our food culture and dietary habits. Despite 100 years of change, however, food has not lost the central role it plays in our lives.

The 21st century promises to be just as exciting, eventful, and dramatic as the last. Technology will march on, society will change, and what we eat and where we eat will become even more varied. But I am convinced that one thing will remain the same: For bringing people together, for celebrating the most important moments in our lives—nothing pleases us, delights us, and unites us like food.



Dan Glickman
Secretary of Agriculture

Inside...



America's Changing Eating Patterns

- 2 American Cuisine in the 20th Century**
—*Lowell K. Dyson*
- 8 Major Trends in U.S. Food Supply, 1909-99**
—*Judy Putnam*
- 16 A Century of Population Growth and Change**
—*Calvin L. Beale*
- 23 Cooking Trends Echo Changing Roles of Women**
—*Douglas E. Bowers*
- 30 A Taste of the 20th Century**

- 32 America's Fascination With Nutrition**
—*Dennis Roth*

Also Inside

- 38 Food Spending Varies Across the United States**
—*Mark D. Jekanowski and James K. Binkley*
- 44 Many Americans Falsely Optimistic About Their Diets**
—*Young Shim, Jayachandran N. Variyam, and James Blaylock*
- 51 Acculturation Erodes the Diet Quality of U.S. Hispanics**
—*Lorna Aldrich and Jayachandran N. Variyam*